Fairbury Woman Pioneer Film Producer

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John Coomer Jr. was born in Vermont in 1817. His parents were John Coomer Sr. and Sarah Mason. John Coomer Jr. grew up in Vermont and learned the carpenter trade. At the age of 26, John Jr. married Miss Jenette Abbott in Vermont in 1843. Unfortunately, Jenette only lived six months after she married. Two years after her death, John Jr. married Miss Harriet N. Cheney in Vermont. Their first child, Allen C. Coomer, was born in 1847 in Vermont.

In 1848, John Coomer Jr. made an exploratory trip out west to Central Illinois. He decided he eventually wanted to move to what is now the Fairbury area. John Jr. returned to Vermont for seven more years before he moved to Fairbury.

Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad ran its tracks from Peoria to the Indiana border. On December 31, 1857, John Coomer traveled east from Chenoa to Fairbury. There was no sign of a town when he arrived. John built the first house in Fairbury. Mr. Coomer established a lumberyard that did a brisk business because of all the new homes built in the new town.

In 1863, John and Harriet had their second child, Francenna "Fanny" Coomer. In 1863, John Coomer sold his lumberyard. He used the money he made from running the lumberyard to become a real estate agent and lender of money. By 1888, John owned ten houses and lots in Fairbury plus an excellent tract of 350 acres of farmland.

The son of John Coomer Jr., Allen C. Coomer, married Louisa Cox in Fairbury. The daughter of John and Harriet Coomer, Fanny Coomer, married Victor Fogle in 1888 in Fairbury. The Pantagraph wedding announcement reported that Miss Fannie Coomer, a wealthy and well-known young lady in Fairbury, was united in marriage to Mr. Victor Vogel. The Pantagraph likely said she was a wealthy young lady because of her father's extensive real estate holdings in Fairbury.

In July of 1891, Fannie's brother, Allen C. Coomer, passed away at only 44 years of age. Soon after her brother passed away, her father, John Coomer Jr., passed away in Fairbury at the age of 74.

In 1893, Victor and Fanny Fogle had their only child, Harriet Virginia Fogle. She was named after her grandmother, Harriet Coomer. Harriet Fogle grew up in Fairbury and attended Fairbury schools. In 1907, at the age of 87, Harriet Coomer passed away. She left her grand-daughter Harriet Fogle, $12,000 in her will. This amount would be equivalent to $346,000 in today's dollars.

Harriet Fogle graduated with the Fairbury Township High School Class of 1911. The Class of 1911 had eight graduates. Harriet's classmates were Lloyd Lamkin, Nellie Sutton, Reuben King, Wayne Mitten, John Joda, Margaret Carrithers, and Will C. Mundt.

In 1914, the Pantagraph published a story about a Fairbury P.O. Box being an heirloom. The article recounted that John Coomer Jr. built the first home in Fairbury in 1857. John was one of the first people in Fairbury to subscribe to a post office box in 1858. After John died, his daughter, Mrs. Fannie Fogle, continued the subscription. When she died, the grand-daughter of John Coomer, Miss Harriet Fogle, continued the subscription. As of 1914, the post office box had been in the Coomer family for 58 years.

After finishing high school, Harriet attended the prestigious Ward-Belmont school in Nashville. It was regarded as a very prestigious "finishing school" by the more aristocratic families of the South.

Harriet then enrolled at Vanderbilt University as a freshman for the 1914-1915 school year. She was the only female student among the 60 students enrolled in the Vanderbilt Engineering Department. That year Harriet met Warren Watson Bell, who was a sophomore in the Medical Department. In 1914, Harriet received a license plate for the Cadillac she owned in Nashville.

In 1916, at the age of 22, Harriet V. Fogle married Dr. Warren W. Bell in Williamson, Tennessee. Warren Bell was born in Chicago and was a 21-year-old new medical doctor. In the 1920 U.S. Census, Dr. Bell and wife Harriet were living in Manhattan, New York.

In September of 1921, Dr. Bell and Harriet visited Fairbury. Dr. Bell and his wife were spending their summer in Michigan and decided to visit friends in Fairbury.

In March of 1927, the Pantagraph reported that Mrs. Warren Bell of Seattle, formerly Miss Harriet Fogle, called on friends in Fairbury. Mrs. Bell had been in Venice, California, since the early fall of 1926. She had just been in New York and was traveling by automobile back to Seattle. Mrs. Bell had recently entered the moving picture field as a producer of movie films. Her film company was known as the H.V. firm. Harriet had marketed one film and had contracts for six others. When Harriet returned to California, she was going to produce the other six films. Harriet's first production film was scheduled to be in the movie theater circuits soon.

Harriet likely chose H.V. as the name of her film company because that was the initials for her maiden name, Harriet Virginia Fogle. Unfortunately, no records can be found concerning the number and names of the movies she produced.

Sometime between 1927 and 1930, Dr. Bell and Harriet divorced. By the 1930 U.S. Census, Dr. Bell had married Geraldine Lnuk. They had two children, and Dr. Bell died in Seattle in 1955.

Harriet then married James G. Fulton (1894-1966). They lived in the San Diego, California area. James and Harriet Fulton had three children. Harriet passed away in 1986.

Very few women were early film producers in Hollywood. Harriet Fogle was a pioneer in this industry because she was producing films in 1927. Her inherited wealth and her husband's income as a medical doctor could have allowed her to finance her movie production company. It is possible the Great Depression starting in 1929 wiped her out financially. In 1931, her parent's home in Fairbury at the northeast corner of Oak and Fifth Streets was foreclosed and sold at auction. Harriet was also busy with her second marriage and children to raise. Maybe someday, the names and dates of the movies she produced will be discovered.